

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF MISSISSIPPI
SOUTHERN DIVISION**

REPUBLICAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE,
MISSISSIPPI REPUBLICAN PARTY,
JAMES PERRY, and MATTHEW LAMB,

Plaintiffs,

v.

JUSTIN WETZEL, in his official capacity as the clerk and registrar of the Circuit Court of Harrison County, TONI JO DIAZ, BECKY PAYNE, BARBARA KIMBALL, CHRISTENE BRICE, and CAROLYN HANLER, in their official capacities as members of the Harrison County Election Commission, and MICHAEL WATSON, in his official capacity as the Secretary of State of Mississippi,

No. 1:24-cv-00025-LG-RPM

Defendants.

DECLARATION OF JANEssa GOLDBECK

I, Janessa Goldbeck, hereby declare as follows:

1. I am over the age of 18, have personal knowledge of the facts below, and can competently testify to their truth.

2. My name is Janessa Goldbeck and I am currently the Chief Executive Officer (“CEO”) at Vet Voice Foundation (“Vet Voice”) where I have worked for over two years.

3. Vet Voice is a national non-profit, non-partisan organization, founded in 2009 that is organized under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended, for charitable and educational purposes.

4. As CEO, my responsibilities include managing and overseeing personnel, as well as the operations and funding of programs, dedicated to serving over 1.5 million subscribers across the country, composed mainly of active-duty military members, veterans, and their families. These

subscribers are individuals who have taken affirmative steps to become a recipient of communications from Vet Voice. Vet Voice has thousands of subscribers in Mississippi.

5. In addition to its affirmative subscribers, Vet Voice is dedicated to empowering veterans across the country to become civic leaders and policy advocates by providing the support, training, and tools they need to face public-policy issues at home, such as voting rights and combating disinformation, as well as other policy areas like environment, health care, jobs, and more. Increasing turnout among veterans and military voters—and ensuring that their ballots are counted when they do turn out—is critical to this mission.

6. As a nonpartisan organization, Vet Voice works to increase turnout of not just its affirmative subscribers but the broader veteran and military community, and it does so regardless of any individual voter’s political beliefs or party membership. To advance this goal, Vet Voice has built a first-of-its-kind military voter file containing approximately 14 million records of veterans and military family members, including thousands of records for voters in Mississippi, to help the organization focus its mobilization, education, and turnout efforts. These voters comprise the other component of Vet Voice’s constituency.

7. Prior to my time as CEO of Vet Voice, I served for seven years as a commissioned combat engineer officer in the U.S. Marine Corps. I left the Marines in 2019 with the rank of captain. During my time in military service, I deployed to military installations throughout the United States as well as to various countries in Europe in support of NATO operations. I also performed many collateral duties while serving, including acting as my unit’s Voting Assistance Officer at one point in my career.

8. Vet Voice’s subscribers and constituents include active-duty servicemembers and their families who are oftentimes stationed away from their home state. It is oftentimes physically impossible for these voters to appear at the polls in their home state on election day, and thus they are highly reliant on voting by mail, or absentee voting, to exercise their right to vote. According to the Federal Voting Assistance Program, approximately three-quarters of the nation’s 1.4 million

active-duty military members are eligible to vote absentee because they are stationed away from their home state.¹

9. Vet Voice's subscribers and constituents also include veterans, many of whom are over the age of 65 or suffer from physical disabilities, often connected to their military service. Indeed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in March 2023, 27 percent of all veterans have a service-connected disability, including 41 percent of veterans who have served since September 2001.² Older veterans and disabled veterans are also highly reliant on absentee voting to exercise their franchise, given the obstacles they face with appearing in person to vote at their polling location.

10. Federal data shows that active military members are registered to vote, and actually successfully cast a ballot, at significantly lower rates than civilians. In the 2020 presidential election, only 47 percent of active military members voted, compared to the national rate of 74 percent.³ The gap is typically even starker when it comes to military members deployed overseas. These disparate rates in registration and turnout have been traced to unique obstacles that active military members face in accessing the voting system, many of which include the difficulties these voters face in receiving absentee ballots in time to vote them, and getting them returned to election officials in time for them to be counted.

11. I have both personal and professional familiarity with the difficulties that arise with voting as an active military member. For example, during the 2012 election cycle, I participated in an officer candidate school for ten weeks at Marine Corps Base Quantico, during which time we were not allowed to leave the premises. My only option for participating in the election was to vote absentee. However, I did not have access to a phone or the internet and thus could not confirm if or when my ballot had been mailed out or received by my state election officials; I had to take

¹ State of the Military Voter (Federal Voting Assistance Program), <https://www.fvap.gov/info/reports-surveys/StateoftheMilitaryVoter>.

² Employment Situation of Veterans – 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/vet.pdf>.

³ State of the Military Voter (Federal Voting Assistance Program), <https://www.fvap.gov/info/reports-surveys/StateoftheMilitaryVoter>.

it on faith that it was delivered on time through the mail. My experience is a common one in the military.

12. I also know that many deployed military members may not have direct or consistent access to postal services or be able to receive mail addressed to them on a daily basis, such as when they are deployed to combat zones or on ships or submarines. This means that military voters may only have limited opportunities to mail their ballots back and will oftentimes have limited opportunities, or no opportunity at all, to cure deficiencies or other issues with their ballots to ensure their vote will be counted in time.

13. Vet Voice is committed to improving military and veteran voter turnout and believes that growing the “veteran vote” benefits all Americans by engaging those who have served their country in the civic process.

14. Accordingly, a key part of Vet Voice’s mission is to mobilize its subscribers and constituency of military voters and their families generally by giving them the knowledge and tools to successfully participate in elections, especially when they face unique challenges due to being deployed away from home. Vet Voice dedicates significant resources, including money, personnel time, and volunteers, to these voter education and mobilization efforts.

15. Vet Voice’s military voter file is critical to the organization’s activities in specifically targeting and reaching military voters at an unprecedented scale. For example, in the 2020 election, Vet Voice volunteers sent 2.5 million texts to approximately 1.5 million veterans and military families, resulting in a significant increase in voter participation among those contacted. When engaged by a Vet Voice volunteer, voters in the lowest 40 percent turnout propensity were three times more likely to vote early or by absentee than peers who were not contacted.

16. Vet Voice is continuing to expand this military voter file as part of its growing efforts to mobilize the military and veteran community, including in Mississippi. We are currently in the process of planning our voter engagement and education efforts for the 2024 election and expect to significantly build upon our success from the 2020 election cycle.

17. Vet Voice also engages in more traditional forms of voter engagement to educate voters. This includes direct mailing efforts to inform voters about important voting deadlines, including deadlines to return absentee ballots. Vet Voice volunteers also conduct phone banking operations to transmit information about voting to other military voters. Vet Voice also places digital advertising on social media and video platforms to further promote its message and mission. Finally, Vet Voice may advertise on rural radio stations to reach active-duty and military constituents on issues of importance.

18. Because the constituents and subscribers we serve are so dependent on voting by mail, a large part of Vet Voice's voter education mission and programming efforts—whether through our voter file or more traditional means—focus on absentee voting. This is true in Mississippi as well as in other states across the country.

19. Vet Voice is currently planning its outreach strategy in Mississippi for the upcoming 2024 election. A key component of that strategy is understanding the legal landscape to ensure voters have the correct information to vote. This includes giving Mississippi constituents information about their eligibility to vote absentee; how to apply for an absentee ballot; how to properly complete an absentee ballot (which under state law requires obtaining both a witness signature and notarization); as well as educating voters about the state's deadlines for counting absentee ballots, including the current requirement set forth in Mississippi law that ballots be post-marked by election day and received by their local election office no later than five days after election day. Laws like these, which give timely-voted ballots more time to make their way back to election officials to be counted, help enfranchise Vet Voice's constituents, who are uniquely vulnerable to and more likely to be disenfranchised by strict election-day receipt cut-offs for absentee ballots. Understanding and being able to properly educate our constituents on the specific legal landscape in which their ballots will be cast and counted is critical to our mission, particularly in states like Mississippi that do not have no-excuse absentee voting and impose strict conditions on absentee voting.

20. Vet Voice believes the claims that Plaintiffs make in this lawsuit and their request for relief—specifically, to require Mississippi to reject all absentee ballots received in the mail after election day, even if postmarked by or even before election day—are a severe threat to the ability of Vet Voice’s subscribers and constituents to vote in Mississippi, as well as to Vet Voice’s ability to carry out an effective voter engagement and mobilization effort in the state. Plaintiffs’ claims seek to toss out lawfully and timely cast ballots because they happen to arrive shortly after election day. This threatens to disenfranchise, in particular, several different groups within Vet Voice’s core constituencies, including: actively deployed military voters, who heavily rely on absentee voting and often must return their ballots from distant and inaccessible locations with unreliable mail service; active military and their voters currently living outside of their home state, whose ballots often take longer to reach them and to get back to their home state to be counted; as well as veterans over the age of 65 and physically disabled veterans, many of whom rely on absentee voting to vote in Mississippi, but whose ballots are at risk of being thrown out because of minor mail delays. In all of these ways, this lawsuit directly threatens Vet Voice’s mission of ensuring that military and veteran voters, including in Mississippi, have maximal flexibility and opportunity to vote under their states’ laws, and have their ballots counted—and not rejected—for reasons largely out of their control.

21. For all of these reasons, Vet Voice has a strong interest in defending Mississippi’s current absentee ballot receipt deadline, which allows ballots returned by absentee mail voters a few days of leeway in case there are unforeseen and unpreventable mail delays—a common occurrence for military voters, who have no control over how long it will take for their ballots to be transmitted back to election officials in Mississippi.

22. Vet Voice is also concerned that if this effort is successful in Mississippi, it will soon be repeated in other states, many of which have extended ballot-receipt deadlines, harming millions of military and veteran voters across the country and burdening Vet Voice’s efforts to increase the military vote.

23. Given the importance of mail voting to its subscribers and constituents, Vet Voice has previously participated in litigation to protect the ability to effectively cast a ballot by mail. Specifically, Vet Voice has filed challenges in Washington and Colorado to mail-ballot signature matching requirements that increase the risk that a military voter's ballot will be rejected due to inherent flaws with signature matching systems. *Vet Voice Foundation, et al. v. Secretary of State Hobbs et al.*, No. 22-2-19384-1 SEA (Wash. Sup. Ct. King Cnty 2022); *Vet Voice Foundation, et al. v. Secretary of State Griswold*, No. 2022CV334566, (Colo. District Ct. 2022). These efforts reflect our commitment to ensuring that all military voters across the country can access the franchise through fair mail balloting rules.

I certify under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct.

Executed on 2/8/2024

By: Janessa Goldbeck

Janessa Goldbeck
Chief Executive Officer
Vet Voice Foundation